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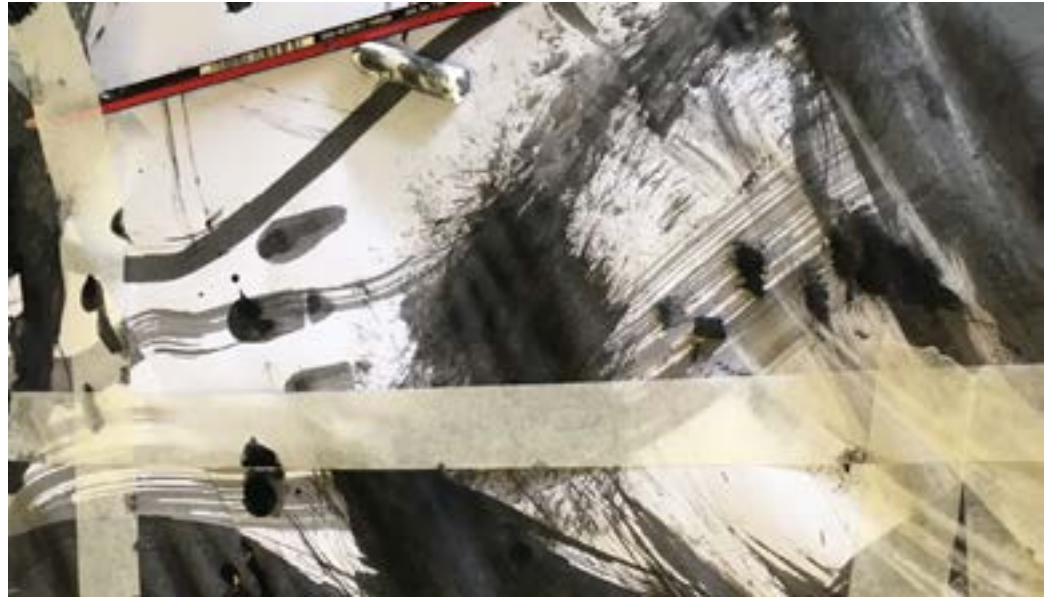
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Trust the Process

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Introduction



This paper presents three practical workshops from a module on BA (Hons) *Graphic Arts and Design* (or *Graphics*) at Leeds Beckett University in the UK. *Graphics* is a course unique in its use of experiential teaching methods, diversity of creative practices and the fostering of a non-hierarchical, collaborative learning environment. In the second year of the degree sits the module *GAD5.2 Process-led Studio Practice* (or *Process Brief*) which on the surface appears to be the ubiquitous, art-school *Graphic Processes* unit where students explore a breadth of processes in order to expand their creative practice. The focus of the module is experimental and presents students with opportunities to discover new approaches to *Graphic Arts and Design*. *Process Brief* isn't so much about practical processes as much as developing attitudes as to material: what this is and more importantly, what this could be. Margaret Iversen writes:

“...there is something terribly arid, not to say mechanistic, in the idea of a world where all our purposes result in predictable consequences, where we are completely transparent to ourselves and where intentions always result in expected actions.” (Iversen, 2010, p. 25)

An experimental module that is concerned with newness and discovery runs the risk of being incompatible with the university convention of Learning Outcomes. As such, during its revalidation, one of *Process Brief*'s objectives was written specifically to give licence to an unorthodox interpretation of an art school standard:

“You will be able to show a developing ability to embrace ambiguity, uncertainty and unfamiliarity in relation to your individual creative practice and to harness

this in the production of meaning.” (Hassall & Winterburn, 2012)

The module requires that students pursue a process-led approach for the duration of the unit, as opposed to being *concept-led* or *design-led* where an idea or a problem to solve can often dictate a predictable and arrived-at-too-soon end-product. As such, *Process Brief* is not about the outcome, but the activity: *the doing and the making*. Of this educator John Holt writes:

“The ‘outcome.’ Why does there always have to be an ‘outcome?’ When I go and see something that interests me, I don’t have to do a dance afterwards or make a six-foot papier-mâché map and hoist it up to the ceiling. I can decide for myself what sort of outcome, if any, I want to have for my experience.” (Holt, 1976, p. 120)

The submission requirement for the module is a one-minute film, which serves as evidence of having adopted a process-led approach. We find that a time-based submission is better for documenting activity than a ‘finished’ physical outcome as it is able to convey the *making* as well as what was made. “The problem in the world today is that we only see the final product” (Syed, 2015)

The three workshops from *Process Brief* are *Magnet Fishing*, *Cave Drawing* and *The Workshop That Must Not Be Named*. Each workshop seeks to loosen the expectation and convention of education in which learning is perceived as a downwardly linear process of guaranteed outcomes. On *Graphics*, we hold the belief that teaching should be mutual, collaborative and experiential. In this way the approaches detailed in these case studies are not just limited to art school: these can be applied to all disciplines; creative, educational or not.

Magnet Fishing



On the very first day of the module we go *magnet fishing*, an activity which involves taking a collection of high-strength, retrieval magnets to the Leeds Liverpool canal. Preparation for the workshop is minimal, which mainly involves filling a bag-for-life with magnets and completing a risk-assessment form. The intention of the session is for us to discover submerged, magnetic material which the students can then turn into new work via a series of creative processes. Previous developments from the session have included assemblage, drawing, photography, sculpture, sound and soft furnishings. Obviously these are the physical, measurable outcomes of an activity which is in the main experiential and social.

The context of *Magnet Fishing* is important in two ways. Firstly, the session involves taking the students off-campus, which frees us from the convention of learning associated with it. *Graphics* exists in an art school setting, but an expectation still exists that teaching is linear delivered by tutors and received - often passively - by the students. Away from these associations, the workshop attracts high numbers as there is an assumption that *Magnet Fishing* is not going to be *work* and will be fun. The students are free to join in with the activity or not, it’s entirely up to them. They can take part, sit and watch or do something entirely different, which includes leaving the session. The context of the canal is also key: the water is murky, and we are unable to see what we are fishing for, creating natural conditions of uncertainty; we have no control over what we might find and we are happy to surrender to this unknowing.

There isn’t a set way to *fish* with a magnet and as such the workshop does not offer any instruction. The magnets are distributed and their use has to be worked out via a process of experimentation. As tutors we take part in the activity too with some of us having been magnet fishing before and others to whom the activity is completely new, sharing this experience for the first time with the students. This normalises the not knowing; we don’t know what to do, but we’ll try something and see what happens. The session is an opportunity for self-instruction where the students (and staff) instruct *themselves* how to *fish*. When children don’t know what to do with something, they play with it to work it out, and in the same way we author our own methods for *Magnet Fishing* by playing with the tools and materials that we have been given.

What is always surprising about *Magnet Fishing* is the way in which the participants become engaged in the activity. Often the session is timetabled during October and as such the weather is cold and wet. In spite of this, participants are still eager to fish in torrential conditions and it can be difficult to drag them away. On one occasion, a student of the group discovered a large object and was having trouble bringing it to the surface. He asked another participant for help and with two magnets they were able to see that the difficult catch was in fact a rather modern bin. Despite knowing that this object wasn’t anything of value, he persuaded two others to help, training a total of four magnets on the bin to see if they could haul it out. After half an hour of bringing this to the surface and then seeing it sink back down, the bin was eventually retrieved. By this point all the participants were soaked from the rain, but ecstatic with their achievement and the activity. The student who originally discovered the bin insisted on carrying this proudly through town back to university.

This combination of not-knowing and self-instruction mirrors the conditions required for discovery learning. In *Child’s Play* for New Scientist, Jerome Bruner details a study in which three groups of children who were required to perform a task of combining tools in order to retrieve a prize from a box. Each group was given different forms of *training* with one being ‘simply allowed to play with the materials’ (Bruner, 1974, p. 127). The *untrained* group performed as well as those that had been instructed, with an additional important observation:

“What was particularly striking was their capacity to resist frustration and ‘giving up’” (ibid., p. 127)

From having staged *Magnet Fishing* on a number of occasions, it has become clear that the material that we gather at the canal is not important (it’s a red herring). It’s not what we discover, but what we *might* discover. The workshop offers an opportunity for participants to experience an ongoing state possibility, encouraging faith and belief in a process even if they come away with nothing.

Cave Drawing

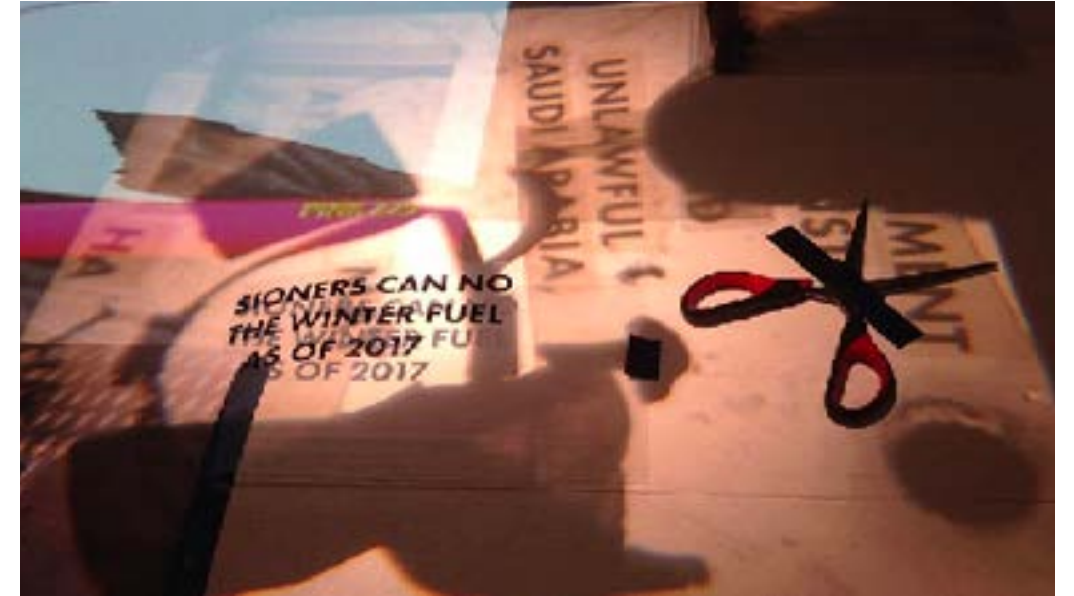


Cave Drawing involves setting up a large-scale opportunity for painting within the studio. The intention of the session is to *just draw* without the suggestion or distraction of there being a right or wrong way to draw. We cover tables with rolls of paper and put out mark-making materials such as inks, brushes, sponges and sticks. These tools are purposely uncontrollable and unconventional in order to encourage experimentation and *mistake-making*. From schooling, students are still anxious about getting things wrong and being asked to do this in public can be a daunting prospect. There is an assumption that their performance will be judged both by their peers and by their tutors, and this can be a hindrance to an experimental module. To remedy this, the tutors draw too. One could be reminded of Mr Sugden, the overbearing PE teacher in Ken Loach's film *Kes* (as played by Brian Glover) who joins in the pupils' football game in order to win, but this is all about *levelling*. In taking part, we're exposing ourselves to these same judgements, and this vulnerability leads to trust. Of this approach, Herbert Read writes that 'the teacher must be no less active than the pupil' (Read, 1966, p. xiv), and by joining in, the aim is for the workshop to become as near to a non-hierarchical collaboration as possible.

One aspect of the *Process Brief* that we are keen to establish is the concept of following one's instincts and letting the material lead the way. To encourage this in *Cave Drawing*, we listen to the audio of *I Contain Multitudes* by Ed Yong (2016), a lecture which describes the microbes that live within our gut, often guiding us and making decisions on our behalf without our conscious knowing. The dialogue is scientific and literal, and serves to divert our consciousness away from the drawing. Whilst the mind is distracted, this enables the mark-making to become an embodied act where the body chooses what to paint. This doesn't happen immediately; the session begins with caution ('do you think this looks like a woolly mammoth?...') and often mistrust, but knowing that we are all drawing together eases this apprehension and allows the ink to flow freely.

As we inevitably run out of space on the paper, the collaborative nature of the workshop becomes acutely apparent. Marks begin to overlap and spill over into other people's territories, and we rotate positions around the tables to actively encourage trespass. Fellow tutor Jo Hassall has a saying: 'it's only paper', which is a stark reality that enables us to loosen up and be more open to the experimental nature of the session. Socially this enables the crossing of communities or cliques that can develop within the undergraduate cohort. Creatively this teaches us to be less-precious about material and allows for accidental hybrids which can then be developed via new processes.

The Workshop That Must Not Be Named



The Workshop That Must Not be Named (or *TWTMNBN*) is a workshop which involves absolutely no preparation other than a room booking; a date, a time and a place. The session takes its title from a Harry Potter themed shop in York, which is itself a play on *He Who Must Not Be Named* from the book by J. K. Rowling (Rowling, 1997, p. 65). To talk or even *think* about the workshop before it takes place would go against its strict no-planning rule. When we imagine what might happen we create an expectation, and this can be problematic in education. Students expect to learn in a set way, which is often the school convention where the teacher leads the class and the pupils follow their instruction. Educators we have expectations of learning too, and prepare for a multitude of scenarios in order to fulfil externally applied requirements. If a workshop or lesson doesn't match this prediction, then it is written off as a failure. But every situation, even those that don't go *right*, are an opportunity for learning. The well-worn (potentially paraphrased) adage 'fail to plan, plan to fail' applies appropriately here, as it is these unexpected mistakes that will lead us to newness and discovery. The more that we plan, the more likely we are to arrive at the same predefined outcomes, and so removing permission for this will unlock invention.

TWTMNBN is about spontaneity and creating something from nothing. But we never truly come to any situation with nothing; we arrive with experiences, skills and strategies that we instinctively apply to new scenarios. The workshop also takes place in an institution rich in resources both material and technical, which we can call upon too. At the start we declare that the session has no plan and as such we don't know what will happen. We don't give the students instructions in what to do: their guess is as good as ours. There is the inevitable moment of doubt at the start where no one knows what to do, but work starts to take place: students locate materials with which to experiment, staff find projectors and stick things to the wall. Creative journeys start, develop and end up where we didn't expect it to. Some participants take pictures of the overlaps between theirs and somebody else's work highlighting the collaborative hybrids that can take place. As the activity unfolds both the students and staff have democratically assumed responsibility for the learning that takes place.

In a module that asks students to 'embrace uncertainty', it's only fair that as tutors we place ourselves in unfamiliar situations too. But just joining in with the activity isn't enough; we are still in control of the session. This discomfort has to be meaningful, so in removing the possibility to plan a workshop exposes us to the same discomfort as the students. This signals to the collaborative community that we trust that what we are doing will lead us somewhere interesting.

Summary

The key to these workshops from *Process Brief* is stepping back. As tutors we often assume the bulk of the responsibility for learning which can perpetuate a passive learning model. In each session detailed here, we step back but not away; we step back and join the community, taking part in the activity too. In this way the responsibility for learning and teaching is shared. In fact, there comes a point in the module where the students forget that they are learning, and we as tutors forget that we are teaching. In loosening the conventional hierarchies of education we enable a more trusting environment. The students need to trust that despite the experimental nature of the module, they are not being tricked. If we include ourselves in the collaboration and subject ourselves to the same unfamiliar situations, then this reinforces our belief in what we are doing.

Each workshop features the same moment of doubt: in *Magnet Fishing* it happens before we instruct ourselves; in *Cave Drawing* it happens before someone ‘breaks the ice’, applying the first mark on the canvas; and in *The Workshop That Must Not Be Named* this happens when we realise that doing something is better than doing nothing. As educators, it is incredibly important that we hold our nerve during this uncomfortable phase and remember that often the best thing that we can do to facilitate active and autonomous learning is *nothing*. If we trust ourselves and trust the process, things will work out alright.

I would like to conclude with some advice from a report from 1862 which sums up this theory:

“Leave the pupils mainly to their own spontaneous, self-activities. The teacher may awaken and give direction to their curiosity by an occasional adroit question; but he should chiefly rely upon the action of his pupils’ own powers for the discovery of new facts. As a general rule, nothing should be told to pupils which they can discover for themselves.” (Michigan. Dept. of Public Instruction, 1862, p. 54)

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All images taken by Benjamin Hall, with the exception of *Magnet Fishing* by Keyan Douglas.